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ABSTRACT

This document describes the exploration and application of effective schools research resulting from university/public schools cooperation in the Springfield (Massachusetts) Public School System. The Academy for Excellence operated as a partnership between the University of Massachusetts School of Education and the Springfield Public School System for 4 years to provide a communications link and a conduit for making the resources of the university more accessible to and usable by Springfield school administrators, teachers, and students. In 1986, academy efforts turned to an exploration of the effective schools movement with a particular focus on strategies for improving attendance, academic skills, high expectations for students and improved school climate. Research outcomes and operational changes set in motion a far-reaching impetus for change in the Springfield public schools. (SI)

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INTRODUCTION

The Academy for Excellence for four years operated as a partnership between the University of Massachusetts School of Education and the Springfield Public School System to provide a communications link and a conduit for making the resources of the University more accessible to and usable by Springfield school administrators, teachers and students. In 1986, Academy efforts turned to an exploration of the Effective Schools movement with a particular focus on strategies for improving attendance, academic skills, high expectations for students and improved school climate. These research outcomes and operational changes set in motion a far-reaching impetus for change in the Springfield Public Schools. The purpose of this paper is to describe the exploration and application of effective schools research which resulted from this university/public schools partnership.

ACADEMY BEGINNINGS

The Academy for Excellence began in 1984 with a Massachusetts Board of Regents of Higher Education decision to expand collaboration with public schools. At that time Springfield administrators were expressing concern about the high absenteeism rates in their secondary schools. A partnership between the University of Massachusetts School of Education and the Springfield Public Schools was formed around this issue. Academy activities began with the formation in each high school of a task force of teachers, parents, counselors, administrators and students to study the problem and make recommendations. Academy staff provided documents which described research into the absenteeism problem and activities undertaken

by other school systems to improve attendance. An all-day workshop launched the work of the school task forces. Academy staff attended subsequent task force meetings and provided support as plans were developed. This general plan was followed the following year with the six junior high schools. Plans implemented varied greatly from school to school and included incentive programs for perfect attendance, telephone calls and letters to parents, and partnerships with area businesses. At the same time, task force members suggested that perhaps students were staying away from the schools because the schools were not meeting their needs. This opened a new avenue of investigation. Academy staff were asked to broaden the scope of their involvement. A thorough literature search indicated that many schools experienced success far beyond reasonable expectations after adopting effective schools guidelines. In order to investigate effective schools research, a study team was formed consisting of the Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Schools and a teacher, counselor or administrator from each junior high school.

THE EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS MOVEMENT

During the 1970s, Dr. Ron Edmonds of Michigan identified and studied schools which were effectively teaching basic skills to poor and minority group students at a time when prevailing theory held that schools had little hope of helping children who were handicapped by their low socio-economic status. Edmonds and other researchers identified characteristics which seemed to be related to these successes and attempted to provide an approach for improving unsuccessful or marginally successful schools. A variety of lists of correlates of effective schools emerged, focussing on

variables such as administrative leadership, school climate, high expectations for students, emphasis on basic skills, and continuous assessment. Schools that demonstrate these characteristics can be found in a number of communities and have been the subject of a considerable amount of research.

SPRINGFIELD'S INVOLVEMENT WITH THE EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS MOVEMENT

Academy staff launched the Springfield study team's investigation of the effective schools movement with a trip to the SHAL schools in St. Louis, Mo., in October, 1986. This began a year filled with visits to schools and conferences, interviews with administrators and teachers, frequent meetings to discuss, question and analyze these experiences, workshops for Springfield faculty and administrators, and a gradual transition of the attendance teams into 'effective schools' teams. An opinion questionnaire was administered to all junior high faculty assessing the five effective schools variables in their schools. The results indicated a need to focus attention on basic skills instruction and continuous assessment of student achievement. The Academy continued to provide a steady flow of research documents describing the work of effective schools around the country, published a newsletter which included articles written by members of the study group, supported the work of the school task forces, encouraged the development of school/business partnerships, hosted workshops for teachers and administrators, and compiled monthly attendance statistics for the schools. At the end of the year, the School Committee expressed its support of these efforts by voting in favor of a five-year plan to

implement outcomes of effective schools research and by funding the work of the school task forces through the establishment of the William Pynchon program.

OUTCOMES

After four years of working with the Springfield School System, the Academy is a welcome partner, trusted by school personnel, and often described as a catalyst for needed change. Academy initiatives have mobilized and inspired large numbers of teachers and administrators. The formation of school-based task forces has not only focused attention upon given problems and identified people to take responsibility for setting goals and seeking solutions, but established the issues as being appropriately addressed by school-based teams, teams which expect research documents and other forms of support from the University.

Absenteeism task forces were established in the high schools in 1985 and the junior high schools the following year. Numerous strategies for encouraging better attendance were implemented, including competitions between homerooms or grade levels, methods for communicating with the parents of students with high absenteeism rates, and rewards or incentives for students with perfect or exceptional attendance. In many cases the pizza parties. Though overall attendance averages have increased slowly, the number of students with perfect or exceptional attendance has shown a marked increase as a result of these initiatives. For instance, one high school increased the number of perfect attenders from 1 during the

1986-87 school year to 52 during the following year; one junior high saw an increase from 20 to 56 during the same period, with an additional 25 students having perfect attendance during three consecutive quarters. The publicity given the attendance programs has helped to make faculty members, students and parents more aware of the seriousness of the problem.

The business partners have not only supported the attendance programs, but some have supplied personnel to serve as mentors to students who have been identified by counselors as in danger of being early drop-outs. Students involved in these mentor programs have shown dramatic improvements in attendance, tardiness and academic achievement. While measurable improvement on the part of a small number of youngsters does little for overall school-wide attendance or achievement averages, it does illustrate the potential impact that an ongoing relationship with a caring adult can have on a disadvantaged student. An expansion of the mentor program is currently underway.

Each secondary school has an active effective schools team which is addressing issues of basic skills and school climate as well as absenteeism. Teachers are looking to the research literature as well as visiting other schools and participating in workshops and conferences in search of information and inspiration. New strategies are being employed. The study team stimulated interest in the middle school concept as being better suited to the needs of adolescents than the traditional junior high and recommended to the school committee that Springfield junior high schools be changed to middle schools. Though limited

facilities and an expanding population makes a complete junior high to middle school change unlikely in the near future, individual schools are being encouraged to adopt a middle school philosophy as much as possible. During the 1988-89 school year, one junior high school moved to a team teaching or school-within-a-school form of organization, and two other schools are planning pilot teams in the fall. Academy staff have been responsive to all individuals seeking information or support in making this change. Early results from the pilot school indicate improved attendance, fewer suspensions and higher achievement levels.

CONCLUSION

Each of the Springfield secondary schools has experienced teacher-implemented changes as a result of their application of strategies learned through analysis of effective schools research literature. The fact that changes are designed by school-based teams based on school needs assessments ensured that improvement plans are tailor-made to the needs of each individual school. Academy activity has been designed to support the school teams, to provide relevant research documents, to improve communication, and to broaden horizons through school visitations. Teachers and [illegible] changes are expected to develop as a result of academy initiatives. This particular university/public school partnership has been a rewarding experience for all involved and [illegible]